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THE DUAL ROLE OF SUBJECT MATTER
TEN OIL PAINTINGS

By

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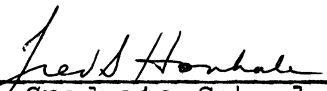
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I. Statement of the problem

The main objective of this series of ten oil paintings was to re-examine the use of recognizable subject matter with regard to twentieth century developments in painting.

The paintings in this series reflect a digested understanding of cubism, expressionism and surrealism. They come out of a direct experience with abstract expressionism and are conscientiously not hard-edge, pop, op, or minimal. Having stated what they are not, it is more difficult to explain what they are. Of all the schools and "isms" that are used to classify paintings this series is closer to the interest of many painters today who are concerned with a new realism. The one unifying factor among this group of artists is the use of recognizable subjects.

II. The dual role of subject matter

Painting recognizable subject matter today has many pitfalls if the painter is concerned with innovation and style. Being very familiar with early twentieth century painting, the artist could easily find himself going back

in history to reiterate pre-abstract expressionist days. On the other hand, a strong reaction against abstract expressionism also helped produce the pop art of the sixties, and pop art is one answer to using recognizable subjects. However, this thesis was primarily concerned with the dual role of subject matter and not so much with style.

When an artist is concerned with recognizable subjects such as the figure, still life objects, and so forth, he invents symbols to express these subjects. The symbol is "read" two ways. First it is seen as the object it represents and this "seeing" is colored by whatever psychological implications the symbol might have for the individual who is looking at it. Secondly, and more important aesthetically, it is seen as a pure abstract shape with a certain amount of visual weight due to its color, shape and placement in relationship to the other forms in the painting.

Simply stated then, subject matter in painting has the dual role of representing both an object and an abstract shape. Emphasis may be given to either role, but one does not negate the other and because both roles are always present, a kind of dual vision is required on the part of the viewer. The important thing is never completely the symbol itself (is it an apple, the moon, or a face?) but how it is used in relationship to other symbols to complete a whole

idea. All of this is fundamentally abstract and is the basis for all meaningful painting, including representational painting.

Why then be concerned with subject matter at all, if, in the end, its abstract qualities are emphasized? Basically there is no difference between abstract or nonrepresentational forms and representational forms; the representational forms are merely combined into familiar patterns we recognize and name. The advantage of working with subject matter in the project was that it presented an opportunity for emotional and psychological involvement which was necessary in order to develop an attitude that could give direction to the work.

The still life paintings in the project were based on familiar objects placed at random on a round table. The still life was not set up in the studio; that would have been a disadvantage. The constant accumulation of multiple daily impressions of familiar objects and places results in a much more vivid and meaningful inner image. But once the inner image is objectified on canvas, it demands to be seen aesthetically, not only for the object or place it represents, but for what it is, a relationship of abstract shapes and symbols enriched by all the tactile qualities that paint can give it. Throughout the project, especially in the still lifes, it was necessary to flatten the modelling on rounded forms and force their abstract shape to the surface.

The two landscape paintings were based on various locations on campus. They were not painted directly from nature, but were "remembered". Both the landscape and still life compositions developed simultaneously; solutions to problems that developed in a still life were applied to a landscape, and the same symbols for object space and background space were used in both.

III. The problem of space

From the beginning, there was a strong belief that the inherent two dimensional quality of the canvas should not be destroyed; and that the reality of a flat canvas should be maintained in some way by the kind of space that is created in the painting.

In the project this problem was resolved by juxtaposing flat space areas and hard edges against areas of shallow space and expressionistic brushstrokes. The thin horizontal and vertical bands of color served the function of reaffirming the flat surface. These bands of color also created tension between the free space areas which suggested some depth and the flat space areas which denied it. In areas where hard-edge bands were not used, the two-dimensional quality of the canvas was emphasized by tilting planes forward and creating passages of movement parallel to the surface.

There was also an interest in establishing an outward or upward pattern of movement that would direct the eye

from some point within the canvas outward to the edges and suggest a continuation of the forms in the space outside the boundaries of the painting. This became so dominating an interest that some of the paintings were not framed because it was thought that the restricting lines of a frame were contrary to this feeling of expansion.

IV. Conclusions

While working on these paintings it was so obvious that similar forms are repeated by nature and by man in all kinds of subject matter. These forms and shapes are even found under the microscope and in aerial views of land formation--in the microscopic and the macroscopic worlds. By selecting the natural forms which appeal most strongly and directly to his senses, an artist can develop a personal vocabulary of forms which can be used to express any subject.

Throughout the project paintings, oval or rounded forms dominate. These curving lines and circle shapes are counter-balanced by strong horizontal and vertical directions. The horizontal bands of color or vertical movements provide a stabilizing understructure for what is otherwise a very organic and sensuous organization of forms.

Aside from the ever present technical problems of painting and development of skill, one of the most persistent problems throughout the project was maintaining

the inner freedom and state of mind necessary to keep an easy flow to the brush and to let things happen.

Freedom from being too rational, too tight, too bound by preconceived ideas--that is a level of maturity that comes, perhaps, after years of struggle. But the struggle cannot show; the work cannot be labored or mundane or ordinary. The most successful work in the project should convey this freedom of spirit.

Collage was used in several paintings because it was the best solution to a particular problem; it allowed for more freedom in working and created a surprise element by juxtaposing unlikely surfaces, patterns, and shapes. It helped increase the excitement achieved by the unexpected and reinforced the belief that the least one can ask of art is that it help one experience other levels of consciousness.

There is a deep current of intuition in this kind of art and a search for richer meanings in the accoutrements of familiar reality.



OLD MAIN Oil on canvas $42\frac{1}{2}$ " x 54"



COCO-LOCO Oil and collage on canvas 16" x 20"



OTHER WORLDS Oil and collage on canvas 34" x 44"



MOTHER EARTH Oil, lacquer, collage 33½" x 49½"



DREAM STILL-LIFE Oil on canvas 16" x 22"



CALIFORNIA STILL-LIFE Oil on canvas 30" x 30"



STILL-LIFE WITH FAVORITE OBJECTS Oil 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 54"



STILL-LIFE WITH ORANGES Oil on canvas 22" x 26"



CINEMA

Drawing, collage

28" x 40"



PURSUIT OF CULTURE

Conte Drawing

22" x 30"



ME AND THEE

Conte Drawing

22" x 30"



FREE SPIRITS

Conte Drawing

22" x 30"